

Women Pursuing Leadership and Power:

2004 Leadership Survey Results contradict popular media assertions

OVERVIEW

Recent media articles have heralded the "Opt Out Revolution," claiming that women are shunning leadership and power at work for full-time motherhood. This claim has garnered remarkable currency. Stories in *The NY Times Magazine*, *Time*, *Business Week*, *Fortune*, *Fast Company*, and CBS's "60 Minutes" built on one another to create a tenacious narrative that women are choosing to leave or avoid high powered positions at work in order to become full-time parents.¹ Underpinning these arguments is the assertion that women are ambivalent about leadership and power and are willing to sacrifice these to invest in their families.

These assertions about women "opting out" are disturbing and, indeed, dangerous. Why?

1. They are stories of a few women. They are based on anecdotal information from small samples of women — primarily privileged, white, female managers and executives — rather than on statistical survey data of large numbers of women.

2. If taken into mainstream thinking, these assertions will curtail opportunities for women. They reinforce gender stereotypes that women are not as committed as men to the world of work and that women do not "have what it takes" to be leaders.

3. Lastly, these assertions take the mantle of responsibility for change away from organizations and place it squarely on the shoulders of individual women.

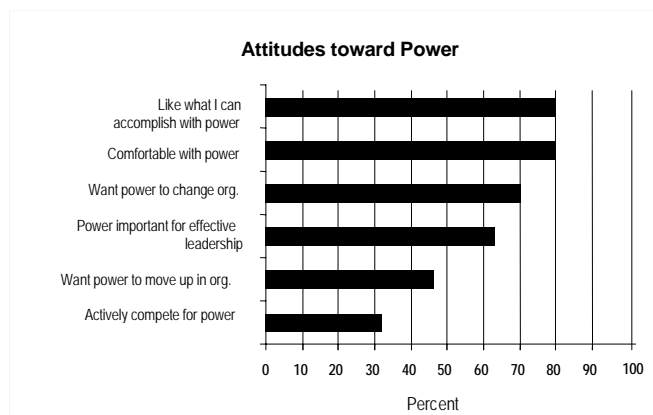
Disturbed by the extent to which the notion of the "Opt Out Revolution" has been taken up as "truth" despite little supporting data, the Simmons School of Management collaborated with Hewlett Packard to survey professional women about their views of power and leadership.² Our findings challenge the assumptions underlying the purported "Opt Out Revolution." Indeed, women responding to our surveys are pursuing, not shunning, power and leadership. Even more important, they are pursuing leadership and power for goals much broader than their own personal gain and career advancement. They are seeking to strengthen their organizations and make constructive contributions to their communities and society.

KEY FINDINGS

Attitudes Toward Leadership

Women do aspire to leadership in the organizations

- 75% of respondents wanted to be influential leaders in their organizations
- Nearly half (47%) aspired to the highest leadership positions



Attitudes Toward Power

Women respondents' attitudes toward power echo their attitudes toward leadership.

- 80% of respondents indicate that they are comfortable with power, respected it, and liked what they could accomplish with it.
- Only 45% of respondents said that they wanted power explicitly to move up the organizational ladder and only 32% indicated that they actively competed for power.
- In contrast, 65% said they saw power as important to effective leadership and 70% wanted power to change their organizations.

Strategies for Acquiring Power

Our studies revealed that women acquire power by:

- Building relationships — focusing on empowering teams or units, supporting coworkers and subordinates, and building networks and allies; and

Pick up your copy of the complete article (CGO Insights #20) at the Simmons SOM booth.

Challenging the Myth of the “Opt Out Revolution”

- Achieving results — identifying new opportunities, taking risks, and expanding access to resources.

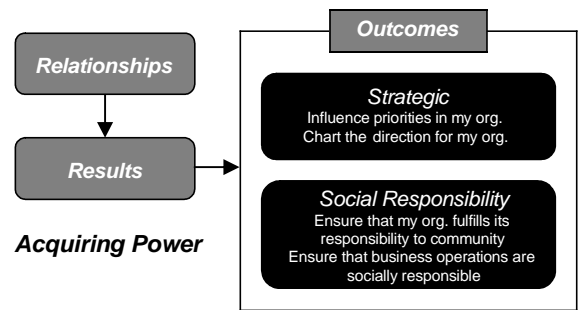
Power for What?

Women's goals for exercising power, like their goals for leadership, are focused externally on changing their organizations and society more broadly. Our study revealed that women's primary goals were:

- Strategic - in that they want to chart the direction of their organizations and influence the priorities of their firms.
- Socially-minded — in that they want to ensure that their organizations fulfilled their responsibilities to their communities and that their business operations were socially responsible.

CONCLUSIONS

- **The issue of women “opting out” of the workplace has been overplayed in the media.** Women responding to our surveys indicate clearly that they are committed to workplace leadership and to exercising power constructively. Relevant to the Opt Out Revolution, we found no significant differences in aspirations for leadership and power among women with or without children. This challenges the assumption that women are shunning leadership roles in their organizations and opting for parenting instead.
- **Women are redefining leadership and power.** Our findings suggest that women are not shunning leadership and power, at least not on their terms. They may be turning away from the more traditional trappings of hierarchical leadership and power, but they are engaging actively in pursuing leadership and power with the aim of achieving bottom-line results, supporting their employees, and making change that is beneficial to their organizations, their community, and society.
- **Women pursuing leadership and power benefit all inside and outside our organizations.** Our research, and that of many others, suggests that the paucity of women at the top has little to do with their lack of interest in leadership and power or their choices to leave the world of work to pursue parenting. Rather, the lack of women at the top has much more to do with subtle, but tenacious biases about women



and leadership that persist, below the surface and often unrecognized, in organizations today. Only 30% believed that women and men have an equal chance of advancing to the highest levels. The implications of these concerns are sobering given that our final results revealed that dissatisfaction with advancement opportunities was the most critical factor influencing women's consideration of leaving their organizations. Even more worrisome is that this concern is most prominent among women who see themselves as effective leaders. This lack of satisfaction with advancement is directly related to women's perceptions about whether they have the opportunities to exercise power and leadership.

The lesson for organizations is that constraining possibilities for women to lead will result in the costly loss of talent. The more intangible, and perhaps more significant, cost is the loss of leaders — leaders who are committed to building effective organizations that serve as exemplary corporate citizens.

D. Merrill-Sands is Acting Dean at the Simmons School of Management and CGO Affiliate; J. Kickul is Elizabeth J. McCandless Professor of Entrepreneurship; C. Ingols is Associate Professor of Management.

¹ Belkin, L. Q. Why don't more women get to the top? A: They choose not to. *The New York Times Magazine*, October 26, 2003; Sellers, P. Power: Do women really want it? *Fortune*, October 13, 2003; Staying at home: Career women deciding to stay at home to raise their kids. "60 Minutes," CBS News, October 10, 2004; Tischler, L. Where are the women? *Fast Company*, February 2004; Wallis, C., et al. The case for staying home: Why more young moms are opting out of the rat race. *Time*, March 22, 2004.

² We gratefully acknowledge Hewlett Packard's support in the design and administration of these electronic surveys.